

The Cultivation of Skills through the Study of Philosophy

Zailan Moris

School of Humanities

Universiti Sains Malaysia

Philosophy, the mother of all sciences and knowledge, is often viewed as an extremely challenging discipline in the Arts or Humanities. The kinds of questions and issues it deals with, the abstract nature of its discourse, and its technical vocabulary have all made philosophy to be regarded not only as too difficult a subject to engage in but also as not leading to any particular skills which are sought after at the workplace. Consequently, many students shy away from making philosophy a discipline of their choice. In this paper, I would like to dispel some of the inaccuracies and misconceptions concerning philosophy by identifying certain intellectual skills that can be attained from the study of philosophy which will prove useful at the workplace and will be appreciated by employers as assets.

Philosophy

Philosophy begins from 'man's sense of wonder' (Stumpf, 1983: 3) and of wanting to know the true nature of things. The fact that things may not what they seem to be, such as a straight piece of stick in a glass of water appears crooked to the observing eye, and the ground under our feet is still when in fact, the earth is rotating on its axis and simultaneously revolving around

the sun, have made philosophers from the very beginning of time not only to be sceptical of knowledge based on sense perception alone but also to be cognisant of the difference between 'appearance' and 'reality'.

The experience of being in this world of change and becoming, of witnessing the processes of 'birth, growth, decay and death, raises not only the fundamental existential questions of personal identity' (Who am I?) and the meaning of life (Why are we here?) but also questions concerning the world around us (ibid) such as: How do things and persons come into existence? What are things made of? And what happens to things when they pass away? The history of science and philosophy are the same in the beginning, hence the appellation, 'philosophy is the mother of all knowledge'. Only later, did the various disciplines separate themselves from the all-embracing field of philosophy (ibid: 4)

Philosophy is an intellectual activity, of thinking, pondering, reflecting, analysing and evaluating. It is 'thinking about basic questions' concerning ourselves and the world we live in, 'in a mood of genuine and free enquiry' (ibid.) In this basic sense, every thinking individual has a philosophy, even though he may not write or express it in a clear, logical, structured or organised way. But as an intellectual discipline or a field of

study, philosophy has to be defined in more specific terms.

Etymologically, the term 'philosophy' is derived from the Greek words 'philo', meaning 'love or loving', and 'sophia', which means 'wisdom'. Philosophy, therefore, means the 'love of wisdom' or 'the love of knowledge and wisdom' (Titus, 1970: 7) since there can be no wisdom without knowledge, whether it be theoretical or practical. Several characteristics distinguish philosophy from other intellectual activities or disciplines. The following are five characterisations of what philosophers generally consider to be the approach, nature and function of philosophy (ibid: 7-10).

1. Philosophy is a personal attitude toward life and the universe.

Oftentimes, we hear the phrase that someone is being philosophical about the problem that he or she is facing. 'Being philosophical' here means that the individual is seeing 'the problem in its broad perspective, in the larger picture of things' (ibid : 7) or seeing it from other angles apart from his or her own. To see things in perspectives other than one's own or to see things from as many possible aspects there are to a question or an issue, requires not only open mindedness, tolerance and courage (ibid) but more importantly, a willingness to put aside one's subjective thoughts and feelings which is a necessary

first step towards being objective. ‘To be objective is to die a little’, states Frithjof Schuon, an eminent authority on philosophia perennis or perennial philosophy (Schuon, 1992: 58).

2. Philosophy is a method of reflective thinking and reasoned inquiry.

Although reflective thinking and reasoned inquiry ‘is not the exclusive property of philosophy and philosophers’ since every intellectual discipline makes use of it (ibid), however what sets philosophy and philosophers apart is the degree of rigour they apply to it and the extent they are willing to pursue it. Philosophers throughout the ages are known for being extremely critical and relentless in their pursuit to know and understand something. To inquire to the logical end of things or to the root of a matter so as ‘to leave no stones untouched’ is a characteristic of a philosophical inquiry into a particular question or subject matter.

3. Philosophy is an attempt to gain a view of the whole.

‘Philosophy seeks to combine the conclusions of the various disciplines and long human experience into some kind of consistent worldview’ (ibid: 8). The philosopher aspires to see things or life, ‘not with the specialised slant of the scientist or the businessman or the artist but with the over-all view’ which takes into account of the totality of things (ibid). By making use of and reflecting on the results or data from the various disciplines or fields of knowledge, philosophers attempt to reach general conclusions about the questions we have. In this respect, ‘philosophy is not a special

subject matter’ since ‘the field of philosophy is as broad as human life itself’ (ibid).

“To inquire to the logical end of things or to the root of a matter so as ‘to leave no stones untouched’ is a characteristic of a philosophical inquiry into a particular question or subject matter”

4. Philosophy is the logical analysis of language and the clarification of the meaning of words and concepts.

Almost all philosophers, ancient or modern, East or West, are involved in clarifying and analysing the meaning of terms, and the use of language. Language is the tool or medium of expression of man’s thoughts. There are philosophers who consider this as the main task of philosophy, and there are a few such as the analytic philosophers who view it as the only legitimate function of philosophy (ibid: 9).

5. Philosophy is a group of problems as well as theories about the solution of these problems.

There are certain fundamental problems that interest humanity as a whole since time immemorial and for which philosophers have taken upon themselves to seek answers to (ibid). For example: What is truth? What is good? What is being? Are human beings free? Where does knowledge come from? How can we know that which we know is true? Is language the result of human experience or does language order our experience? These are

all philosophical questions. ‘The attempt to seek answers or solutions to them has given rise to theories and systems of thought’ (ibid: 10). In this sense, ‘philosophy means the various theories or systems of thought developed by the great philosophers’ (ibid) throughout the ages from all over the world in different languages. And we have indeed a great and varied legacy of philosophical thought which addresses and deals with the perennial questions that interest humanity, such as those mentioned above.

Skills

From the above discussion on philosophy, what skills can an individual acquire from engaging in its study? Essentially, philosophy is a discipline which cultivates an inquiring and a critical mind.

First, philosophy requires the individual who studies it to use his or her mind or intelligence to comprehend, analyse, and reflect on what is said or written concerning a particular question or issue. In order to comprehend and analyse a philosophical discourse, a student is required to study the particular philosopher’s choice of words, use of language, arguments to support his view or claim, the assumptions that underlie his arguments and the conclusions he draws from them. In the process, a student cultivates a sensitivity for the careful and clearly defined use of words, the rules of valid and sound reasoning, and the importance of consistency and coherence.

Second, philosophy trains the individual to ask questions, i.e. the necessary questions, the logical questions that follow as a consequence of stating or asserting

something. It trains the student's mind to move in an organised and systematic manner based on the principles of logical thought, and of valid and sound argumentation.

Third, philosophy requires the individual to distinguish between the important from the unimportant, the primary from the secondary, and the essential from the non-essential. In other words, it requires the student to go to the root of the matter, to the crux of the problem, and to the thrust of the issue. This exercise cultivates in the student the ability to grasp the fundamental issue and line of reasoning or arguments, regardless of the complexity of the discussion at hand. Finally, all of the mental or intellectual activities mentioned above are to be done in an open and objective manner. Thus, the study of philosophy impresses on the student the importance and value of free and independent enquiry into a particular issue or subject matter. The natural human impulse or desire to know is best served by an intellectual ambience that is free and open, unencumbered by human emotions, prejudice and preconceptions or presumptions.

“the study of philosophy impresses on the student the importance and value of free and independent enquiry into a particular issue or subject matter”

Our thoughts are the foundation of our actions. We do something as a result of how we think about it or view it or evaluate it. The more clear and correct we are in our thinking, the better are our decisions and actions arising from

it. In order for us to decide wisely and to act accordingly, ‘we need to discover values and the meaning of things’ (Titus, 1970: 15). In other words, we need ‘to make choices and to act on the basis of some scale of values’ which distinguish truth from falsehood, good from evil, right from wrong, beauty from ugliness (ibid). ‘Philosophy which is interested in the qualitative aspects of things’ deals precisely with the fundamental categories of values mentioned earlier, not as means but as ends in themselves (ibid). Thus, the study of philosophy nurtures in the individual a keen and discerning sense of values that will both inform and aid him in his judgment, decisions and actions.

In the human person, knowledge, actions and being are closely inter-related. ‘To know is to be’ states an ancient adage (Schuon, 1991: 96). What we know not only determines who we are, but who we are also determines what we know (Nasr, 1981: 310-11). Philosophy helps us to know in order to be that which we know.

Conclusion

The study of philosophy which cultivates an inquiring mind by engaging with the big questions dealt with by philosophers, trains students to ask the necessary and crucial questions which is an important step in problem solving. The intellectual habit of going to the root of the matter develops a diagnostic and incisive approach, and the demand to distinguish between the essential from the accidental or superfluous, cultivates discernment.

In addition, the emphasis on reason and rationality, nurtures a keen sense of objectivity that is necessary for sound judgement.

All of these qualities make the student of philosophy to be particularly skillful, for example, at problem solving, analysing texts or arguments, providing a comprehensive report of a complex issue or subject matter, mediating between different or conflicting parties, identifying and highlighting issues that are related to values such as ethics and morality. Thus, a graduate who has studied philosophy will not only prove to be an intellectual asset but also a principled individual at the workplace.

“The intellectual habit of going to the root of the matter develops a diagnostic and incisive approach, and the demand to distinguish between the essential from the accidental or superfluous, cultivates discernment.”

References

- Nasr, S.H. (1981). Knowledge and the Sacred. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co.
- Schuon, F. (1992). Echoes of Perennial Wisdom. Bloomington: World Wisdom Books.
- Schuon, F. (1991). Roots of the Human Condition. Bloomington: World Wisdom Books.
- Stumpf, S. E. (1983). Philosophy: History and Problems. (Third Edition) New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co.
- Titus, H.H. (1970). Living Issues in Philosophy. (Fifth Edition) New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.